

SEPTEMBER 5, 2003

**SCHAKOWSKY ADDRESSES HUNDREDS OF NURSES IN WASHINGTON, D.C.**

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- Thank you so much for inviting me today to meet with you as part of the Stand for Patients Conference: Advocacy in Action. SEIU has been doing a remarkable job in speaking out and standing up for patients, and I want to thank President Andy Stern for his commitment and his leadership.

I am a proud union member. I know how important it is to be part of a union - to have the support of your brothers and sisters and your International when you bargain for better working conditions and patient care or when you lobby for safe needles or a ban on mandatory overtime. Nurses who have the power of their union behind them are more confident advocates. Hospitals know that if they try to seek reprisals against organized nurses who speak out for their patients, they will face the force of entire union.

That is why it is my privilege to work with Tom Balanoff, SEIU locals, and the SEIU Hospital Accountability Project in Illinois to protect patients and to organize nurses. Whether it's advocacy or action - SEIU is there. I'm grateful for that and your patients are grateful for that.

I want to apologize to you that I cannot stay for the entire speak out session today because I have to catch a plane back to Chicago. I'm going to try to keep my remarks short, so that I can hear from as many of you as possible before I have to leave.

First, though, I want to take a minute to make sure you know how valued you are and how respected you are. Whenever there is a poll about who is most trusted to speak the truth about health care, nurses appear at the top of the list. Health care consumers rely on you to advocate on their behalf. Hospital patients depend on their nurses to monitor their needs and respond when they need help.

Unfortunately, although we all rely on you, few of us understand how difficult it has become for you to promote patient safety and do your jobs. There are many efforts underway to attract people into nursing, but few know that 1 in 5 licensed nurses could be practicing today but have left the profession, largely because of understaffing. Nurses are willing to put up with a lot, but many of you find it hard to work in hospitals where your patient load is more than any human being could possibly handle without risk. It's time that we stop asking you to put up with an impossible situation and instead concentrate on changing the situation itself. If we want to end the hospital nursing shortage, the first and best place to start is to pass safe staffing standards.

That is why I am so glad that you asked me to sponsor federal safe staffing legislation and why I am so committed to getting it passed. I am honored to be working with SEIU,

with your great lobbyist Madeleine Golde and with other unions on this critically important issue.

Safe, minimum staffing ratios will protect patients, they will help you avoid burnout and they will keep you in nursing. How outrageous is it that, in this great country, consumers are afraid to go into the hospital because they are afraid no one will be there to take care of them? How incredible is it that, knowing of the understaffing epidemic, health care magazines actually encourage patients to hire a "sitter" so someone will be around to respond to their needs? There should be enough qualified nurses on hospital staffs to be able to handle patients' needs. When we pass safe staffing standards, there will be.

We are ignoring an understaffing crisis that annually costs thousands of Americans their lives? Every year, 98,000 patients die in hospitals across the country because of preventable injuries - more than the numbers who die from automobile accidents, breast cancer and AIDS combined.

Many of those patients die because there isn't a nurse at their bedside - a nurse trained to prevent, detect and respond to problems.

In fact, nurse understaffing is a significant factor in 1 out of every 4 unanticipated deaths, half of all respiratory cases.

You know the statistics but, better than anyone, you know the real life disasters created by understaffing. Many, many nurses have told me that they go home every night or every morning replaying events in their mind. You may have had the same experience - knowing that you were unable to do everything possible for your patients and wondering if a patient's health was compromised because you didn't have the time to provide all the quality care you are trained to give.

We know a big part of the solution - minimum, mandatory, safe staffing ratios.

A Journal of the American Medical Association study showed that patients are 31% more likely to die in hospitals where nurses are required to care for 8 as opposed to hospitals where nurses care for 4 patients. I ask you - knowing that, why do we continue to ask nurses to care for 8 or 10 or more patients? You know that is wrong, and your patients know that is wrong.

I want to congratulate the nurses here from California who have won safe staffing standards in their state legislature. And I want to encourage all of you who are working on bills in other states, including Illinois. When you win enactment of state bills, you win two victories. First, you make the patients in your state safer and prevent needless deaths and injuries. Second, you help build the case for action here in Washington D.C. Time after time after time, the U.S. Congress has followed the examples set by state legislatures. If it works in California or Pennsylvania or Nevada, members of Congress are more likely to believe that it will work across the country. And they are

hard pressed to explain why patients in all states don't have the same protections as patients in some states.

Working with you, I am drafting legislation to establish safe, mandatory staffing ratios in hospitals. Those standards will be the minimum - hospitals will also be required to work with their direct care nurses to develop staffing plans that require additional nurses when needed. We will provide whistleblower protection to nurses to enforce those standards. And our bill will also include provisions to pay for additional nurses and nurse training programs. We must not cut corners when it comes to patient care. We will provide the resources needed to meet staffing ratio requirements.

I can tell you that consumers are willing to pay more for that protection. Last Congress, I sponsored legislation to establish minimum staffing ratios in nursing homes. When I surveyed my constituents to see whether they would pay an additional 10% in nursing home costs if necessary to pay for safe staffing ratios, 85% of them answered yes. In fact, protecting patient safety got the single biggest response of any question asked.

You are the best advocates I can think of to push for enactment of this bill, to fight to protect your patients.

I am proud to be with you in the fight, and I look forward to hearing from you this afternoon.